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The Kremlin's Voice

Pravda Is Called Dull, But It Isn't if You Read Between Lines

It Offers Clues to Party Line, Sells Over 9 Million Copies, Enjoys Fat Profit Margin

Kazakhstan Gets a New Gym

By RAY VICKER
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

MOSCOW—Around the world, it was front-page news: Nikita Khrushchev was dead.

But here in the Soviet capital, the death rated a mere 57 words in Pravda—nearly 48 hours after the event. To readers of Pravda, the world's leading Communist newspaper, the scant coverage really wasn't abnormal; it simply confirmed again that the deposed Soviet leader was still on the official blacklist.

News coverage that is strange or stale to Western eyes is standard fare in Pravda. For a typical lead front-page item one recent day, the paper carried a verbatim transcript of a government directive on farm irrigation. The same day, the paper featured inside a picture of three computer engineers stressing the need for increased industrial efficiency.

But Soviet citizens read Pravda with avid fascination. Unlike any Western newspaper, this principal organ of the Soviet Union's Communist Party is the rule book and source of current ideology for a whole nation. If you know how to read them, all those dry reports —like the belated handling of the Khrushchev death— are full of intriguing clues about what is really going on in Russia.

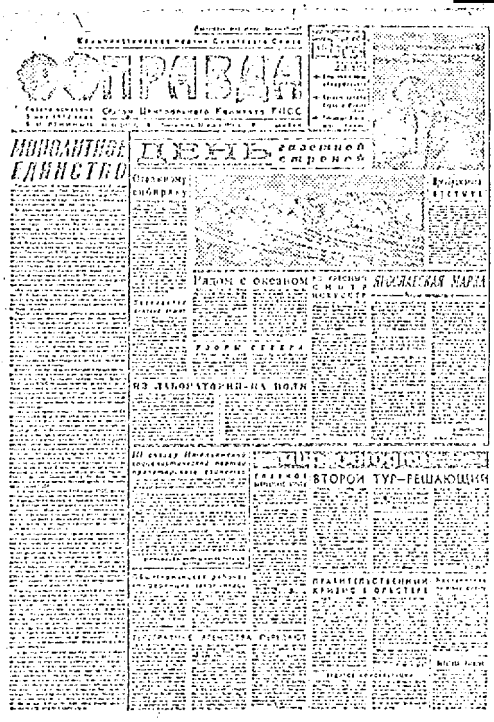
Dull as Pravda might seem to American readers, it is in many ways one of the world's most successful—and most profitable—publications. With a circulation of 9.3 million, Pravda has become the world's largest-selling daily newspaper. Circulation has soared 41% from the 6.6 million in 1965. The party paper has thus decidedly bypassed its closest competitor, the government paper Izvestia, which sells about 7 million copies a day.

A Real Money-Maker

This year Pravda expects to earn a profit that would make many publishers of far jazzier capitalist papers drool: $22 million, or more than 27% of sales. This despite a newsstand price of three kopeks (3.3 U.S. cents) and advertising revenues of zero.

Pravda (which means "truth" in Russian) is top priority reading for Westerners trying to detect shifts in Soviety policy—providing they know how to find the clues. In April each year, for instance, Pravda publishes a series of suggested slogans for May Day celebration banners and placards.

Last May Day's suggested slogans included: "Hail May 1, Day of International Solidarity of the Toilers" and "Proletarians of the World Unite." This may sound innocuous enough. But when the Soviets are in a belligerent mood, slogans warn against "American imperialism" or "West German revanchism." Thus innocuous slogans can have real meaning.



This year's 60 suggested slogans treated the United States and most other Western countries mildly. They seemed to treat Zionism as the biggest outside enemy and stressed Arab-Soviet solidarity.

"Our approach to stories is different from a paper like, say, The New York Times," says Serge Tsukasov, the youthful-looking 48-year-old managing editor. "We direct ourselves to problems, not to events."

Thus crime, catastrophe or celebrity news that might rate page one treatment in the U.S. rarely rates a single line in Pravda unless it helps convey an editorial point. Many Pravda news stories editorialize heavily to support a party position. A story on Russian black market profiteering is reported in a scolding manner. A news photograph of Washington, D.C., police beating up an anti-war demonstrator helps support an accompanying article criticizing the U.S.

But the points being made are often the real news because they show what the Soviet hierarchy is thinking. The Communist Party's ruling body, the Central Committee, appoints all key editors. Mikhail Zimjanin, the chief editor and a former ambassador to North Vietnam, is a member of the committee.

A Definition of "Freedom"

Pravda editors scoff at the idea that they are simply mouthpieces of the committee, however. "We are responsible for Pravda. We are not dictated to in our day to day operations," claims Vadim Nekrassov, the scholarly looking deputy editor. But the editors thoroughly understand the party line and are imbued with Lenin's concept that "freedom of the press is freedom for the political organizations of the bourgeoisie."

[illegible] cism of the Kremlin leadership. Kremlinologists believe there is little chance indeed that the paper will deviate from the Central Committee line. But if you're a Russian trying to follow the party line, this has a value of its own.

An especially valuable key to the party line is the "leader," a 900-word article printed on the left of the first page nearly every day. Conceived by Lenin himself and written in editorial style, the leader interprets or stresses some phase of currrent party doctrine. Diverse in subject matter, leaders may urge greater cooperation with developing countries, advocate increased industrial use of computers or criticize Western nations.

Other serious articles on domestic or international subjects fill the rest of Page 1. On most days, another five pages complete the paper. Pravda's thinness, of course, is one reason the paper can sell so cheaply and still show a profit.

Page 2 covers internal party affairs, official appointments, economic problems and letters to the editor. The third page is devoted to science, literature, the arts and culture. Page 4 stresses reports of foreign Communist and socialist parties.

Page 5, the newsiest in the paper, carries reports from Pravda's 42 bureaus abroad, including one in Washington and another in New York. Either on its own or through the Soviet news agency, Tass, Pravda has use of most major foreign press services, including the Associated Press and United Press International.

Page 6 covers sports, travel, the theater and other leisure activities. When the Soviet hockey team wins a world championship, the whole page may be devoted to the victory. But if a Soviet team is walloped on a playing field, Pravda might not print a single line about it.

Throughout the paper are numerous official documents and statements printed verbatim. Typical is a statement by Marshal Andrei Grechko that starts: "In the conditions brought about by the aggressive policy of imperialism, Soviet soldiers must work even harder to perfect their combat skill, persistently to master the military equipment and weapons entrusted to them, tirelessly to increase their vigilance and combat readiness, to strengthen discipline and vigilantly to protect their beloved motherland."

Pravda editors explain that as an official party organ, the paper is obliged to print major documents in full. But the official statements have contributed heavily to Pravda's worldwide reputation for being a bore. This reputation irritates Pravda editors. "We don't think we're perfect," says Mr. Tsukasov, the managing editor. "But we do try to do a job for our readers and our rising circulation shows we must be doing many things right."

To help find out what readers want, Pravda a few years ago conducted a capitalist-style readership survey. The editors were pleasantly surprised to find that 70% of the readers said

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